



Xenophobia, prejudice, and right-wing populism in East-Central Europe

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Right-wing populist parties have been particularly successful in East-Central Europe in the second decade of the 21st century. We explain this phenomenon using a demand—supply framework. We review studies about characteristics of East-Central European nationalism and intergroup tensions with minorities on the psychological demand side and the anti-immigrant political discourse on the political supply side. We conclude that the success of right-wing populism can be explained by a high, but unstable national identity in the region's countries based on the experiences of the fragile national sovereignty, the deeply embedded and socially acceptable (i.e. normative) intergroup hostilities with minorities (especially toward the Roma minority), and the effective use of immigrant threat in this context.

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right-wing populist parties have turned ideologically and rhetorically into genuine far-right parties, especially since the refugee crisis in 2015 [4]. Indeed, the rise of right-wing populism corresponded with the trend of growing ethnic nationalism only in this region, according to data from consecutive waves of the International Social Survey Programme [5].

To further elaborate the differences, firstly we must acknowledge that right-wing populism in East-Central Europe is embedded in the historically unstable national identities based on territorial insecurities, whereas Western European right-wing populism capitalizes from intergroup conflicts within the national contexts. Right-wing nationalist ideologies are therefore inseparable from territorial revisionism and the fear of extinction of the nation (i.e. collective angst) [6]. According to Minkenberg [2^{*}], this can be explained by the unfinished process of nation-building in East-Central Europe which is connected to its turbulent history in which most of the time, nations experienced limited or no sovereignty. Secondly, conservatism is ideologically and psychologically different in the region than in Western Europe, due to the heritage of socialism. Core conservative attitudes (resistance to change and anti-egalitarianism) are often connected to a wish to 'be taken care of' by a powerful authority on both sides of the political spectrum due to socialist nostalgia [7]. Conservatism in this sense is more dispersed on the political spectrum, and strongly attached to fear of change and norm-violating or culturally different out-groups [8]. In this context, right-wing populist leaders can successfully emerge as 'entrepreneurs of identity' (i.e. leaders who depict themselves as representing the experiences of their followers, rather than as skillful leaders or politicians, see Ref. [9]), exploiting fears of cultural changes.

Successful mobilization by nationalist far-right politics is not unique to East-Central Europe (i.e. the former socialist countries of Europe), as far-right parties have been massively successful in Western Europe as well. In fact, support for genuine far-right parties (e.g. Greater Romania Party, Slovakian National Party, Ataka in Bulgaria) tends to be more volatile in East-Central Europe than in the West. However, these parties endorse ideologies far more extreme than their Western European counterparts. The main difference is that nationalistic and exclusionist discourses of populist right-wing parties are mainstream and represent the center of the political spectrum in East-Central Europe [1,2^{*},3]. In line with this, mainstream

For these reasons, anti-democratic political trends can especially effectively deepen social, economic, and political divides and fuel prejudice in this historically unstable region. In the current review, building on the concept of nationalism, existing intergroup tensions with historical minorities (e.g. Roma people and other minority national groups), and the recent emergence of anti-immigrant political discourse, we explain the success of right-wing populism by a demand—supply match (for a review of far-right politics from a supply—demand approach, see Refs. [10,11]. Although the demand—supply dynamic is a universal model for right-wing populism, as it takes hold in unstable social contexts and amid identity fears

throughout the world, in this paper we investigate the unique historical and social characteristics that characterize the region and generate locally relevant questions regarding the rise of right-wing populism.

To address these local questions, on the demand side, we review recent work on national identity and nationalism, describe the nature of prejudice toward historical minorities and other target groups as the psychological antecedents of right-wing populism, and on the supply side, we show how threat messages used by right-wing populist politicians in the mainstream could lead to unprecedented levels of xenophobia even in the absence of tangible immigration boosting the popularity of radical right parties (for a visual presentation of the process, see Figure 1).

The demand Side

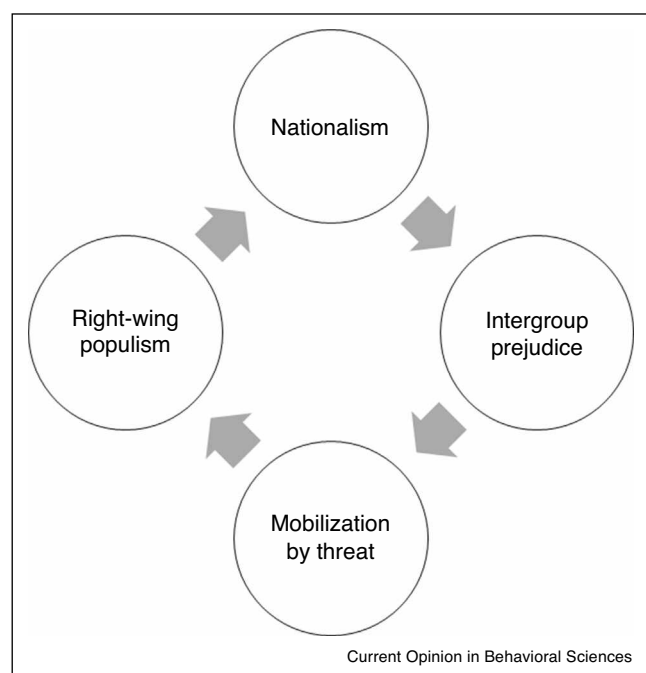
National identity and nationalism in East-Central Europe

Theories of national identity distinguish between positive attachment to one's nation on the one hand, and an exclusionary, inflated, and uncritical view of the national ingroup on the other (building on Adorno *et al.*'s [12] distinction of true and pseudo-patriotism). This distinction indicates that nationalism is not simply a stronger form of identification, but something qualitatively different. Studies about collective narcissism capture the ambiguity of a strong, but unstable ingroup identity and suggest that nationalism requires constant defending

[13]. This need creates hostility toward all people who represent an internal or external threat to the group [14].

The salience of national identity and nationalism in East-Central Europe has been shown in a number of recent studies. A study conducted among Polish participants revealed a stronger connection between collective narcissism and external threat (in the form of belief in anti-Polish international conspiracies) than between ingroup positivity and external threat. When collective narcissism was accounted for, ingroup positivity was no longer connected to these beliefs [15]. In contrast, in the context of Hungary, Kende, Hadarics and Szabó [16] showed that both the mode of identification (attachment versus glorification) and the content of identity (nation versus Europe) matter: ingroup glorification always predicted higher hostility, however, there was a difference between attachment with Europe and attachment with Hungary. The first predicted positive, whereas the latter predicted negative attitudes toward immigrants. In Slovakia, one study found that the perception of a cultural threat to identity was a strong predictor of negative attitudes towards refugees — unlike perceived economic threat and modern racism that did not add anything to the explanatory value of identity-based cultural threat [17]. From these studies, it seems that prejudice and intergroup hostility are rooted in both nationalism and its milder form of national attachment or cultural identity in the region, underlining that exclusive nationalism is more mainstream in the region.

Figure 1



The circular connection between nationalism, intergroup prejudice that makes people susceptible to threat, which leads to growing right-wing populism that.

The stronger connection between national identity and intergroup hostility may be explained by the specific content of national identity. Definitions of the nation as an imagined community reflect the unique characteristics of the historical, political, and cultural context [18] that individuals adapt to different degrees. If membership in a nation is defined in exclusive terms, a mere sense of belonging can also predict intergroup hostility [19]. Citizens of Western countries embrace their national pride in democratic political institutions more strongly than citizens in Eastern countries [20], suggesting the existence of differences in national identity content that in turn can affect intergroup attitudes and hostility.

Prejudice against historical minorities

In East-Central Europe, questions of belonging have been contested for national minorities even before the birth of nation states. Ethnic tensions have been amplified by the peace treaties of the First World War – which redrew all borders of East-Central Europe – and the repression of the communist regime. Anxieties connected to social transformations regarding national citizenship in the post-communist period have shaped political decisions regarding minorities. This is most prominently reflected in punitive solutions in connection with the Roma, the largest ethnic minority group of the region

[21]. Data from international surveys measuring individual-level attitudes clearly indicate that prejudice against various out-groups have been high in the region compared to other parts of Europe in the past decades (Special Eurobarometer, 2015: https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2077_83_4_437_ENG), and closely connected to national identity [22].

The level of prejudice is not simply an aggregate of individual attitudes of a country's citizens. Prejudice (the way it is expressed and the choice of its targets) is also a strategic expression of ingroup identity in the sense that intergroup attitudes can be both unacceptable forms of behavior (i.e. prejudice) and acceptable forms of conduct [23]. This means that the harsh treatment of certain groups can be considered a rational response to perceived norm violations and not considered problematic. This is particularly relevant for prejudice against Roma people (i.e. antigypsyism, for the term, see European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/recommendation-no.13>) in East-Central Europe. It is recognized as a form of prejudice when it is manifested in violence, but it is generally tolerated when expressed as 'reasonable antigypsyism' [24].

Roma people (also referred to as Gypsies) constitute the largest ethnic minority group in Europe, making up 5–10% of the population in Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, Serbia and Bulgaria [25]. Despite a long, shared history with the Roma in East-Central Europe, Roma people represent a marginalized social group that faces discrimination in all areas of social life [26]. Recent studies conducted in Hungary and Slovakia found that prejudice against the Roma is highly normative and acceptable. This is underlined by the way prejudice is expressed against them, that is, through traditional negative stereotypes, and the fact that people do not adjust their level of prejudice to external expectations [27]. Lášticová and Findor [28] point to the risks and limitations of relying on individualistic approaches when trying to reduce prejudice in highly hostile social contexts. Orosz *et al.* [29] offer additional support for the importance of social norms in shaping attitudes toward the Roma by demonstrating the predominantly negative content of personal discourses about Roma people consisting of negative stereotypes, threats and dehumanization. Decades of antigypsyism research suggest that antigypsyism is a stable attitude consisting of traditional negative stereotypes and held by the majority of the population in all countries of East-Central Europe [30,31].

It must be noted that antigypsyism and hate crimes against Roma people are common in other parts of Europe too. What makes the context different is that antigypsyism has become the cornerstone of political mobilization in some countries, such as in Hungary, Slovakia, and

Bulgaria [3,32]. This was enabled by a normative context that is permissive with antigypsyism and prejudice against groups that are perceived as norm-violating or culturally different [7]. Against this historical and political backdrop, fears over the emergence of the arrival of 'new strangers' only exacerbated the general animosities towards minorities, and mobilized people's generalized prejudice [33], making prejudice and the norms of prejudice expression the link between nationalism and right-wing populism.

The supply side

According to results drawn from the European Social Survey, positive attitudes toward immigration appear in countries with a larger Muslim immigrant population, more liberal integration policies, and greater state support of different religious practices [34**]. In line with this, hostility toward Muslim immigrants is highest in countries unaffected by immigration and terrorism, such as in East-Central Europe [35]. In this region, we can observe a form of 'Platonic Xenophobia' (i.e. hatred of Muslim populations without their presence, (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/hungary/2015-07-30/scaling-wall>)), or the fight against the 'imaginary Muslims' (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/imaginary-muslims-how-polands-populists-frame-islam/>). The path chosen by most East-Central European countries in response to the refugee crisis of 2015 was the politicization of immigrant threat and the mobilization of the electorate based on these messages [36,37]. This rhetoric is not unique to the region (see for example the case of Italy: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/muslims-in-the-west-and-the-rise-of-the-new-populists-the-case-of-italy/>), but in the *de facto* absence of immigrant populations from Muslim countries, it is merely a psychological manipulation based on the historically founded fear of the nation's disappearance and threat to its sovereignty (i.e. collective angst) which are genuine historical experiences of people in this region. In East-Central Europe, where national sovereignty has been contested and fears over territorial losses are still strong, nationalist populism can mobilize against minorities based on these particular fears [2*] rather than for example economic threat.

Traditionally, mobilization against historical minorities, such as Jews, the Roma and national minorities was the dominant strategy of radical right parties. Therefore, the influx of refugees to Europe from the Middle East in 2015 gave momentum to populist radical right parties who could capitalize on existing prejudices [38] and the normative contexts that allow the open expression of prejudice. The political exploitation of immigrant threat led to spectacular electoral successes for populist right-wing parties. It is not surprising that anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric helped secure the electoral victory of two mainstream parties (PiS in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary) and created space for the rise of xenophobic players in the mainstream – contrary to Western Europe where mainly the radical parties could capitalize from the

immigration issue. The success of the anti-immigrant rhetoric in Hungary, at a time when Europe was still dominated by 'wilkommenskultur', exceeded expectations. However, apart from the Law and Justice Party in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary, other politicians who exploited anti-immigrant sentiments had electoral successes as well, such as Czech President Miloš Zeman in 2018 (<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/156782/1/156782.pdf>). Sayyid [39] argues that the Czech case fits well into the pattern that Islamophobic mobilization works well in countries where the Muslim minority is negligible, but people can be mobilized by threat. The author recalls that President Zeman warned Czech citizens about a 'superHolocaust' that Muslim refugees were planning.

Recent studies, using opinion poll data and international databases, suggest that xenophobic propaganda by right-wing populist politicians, representing mainstream politics in most East-Central European countries, did not only coincide with the successful mobilization of voters, but also with an increase in intolerance. Thereby, we can assume that propensity to external threat due to the unstable contents of national identity can be described not just as a linear process, but also as a circular one (see Figure 1). The most recent waves of ESS data suggest that the refugee crisis has deepened the gap between the prejudice levels in new (Eastern) and older (Western) member states of the EU (<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/14181-20180815.pdf>), despite the fact that Western Europe was much more exposed to the refugee crisis as the real target of asylum-seekers. Comparative research shows that hostile attitudes towards immigrants have become much stronger in some East-Central European countries than in most Western countries [40]. In all of the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), a significant rise in xenophobia was measured [41].

Conclusions

Using the demand—supply framework to capture the match between the psychological needs of individuals and the dominant political discourse and success of parties, we reviewed the concept of nationalism and issues related to prejudice in the context of East-Central Europe, and the recent success of the use of anti-immigrant rhetoric by right-wing populist parties. We have shown that although the demand—supply framework may be a universal characteristic of right-wing populist mobilization, both sides have unique elements in the East-Central European region. The psychological demand is different because national identity has been historically unstable, encapsulating a genuinely founded fear of extinction both culturally and territorially, making East-Central European citizens susceptible to collective narcissism and nationalist ideologies. Because of the content and instability of national identity that needs constant defending, the harsh treatment of ethnic and national minority groups tends to be socially

permissible, easily justified, and even mainstream. In this normative context intergroup hostility is not even necessarily recognized as prejudice. This is evidenced by the marginalized position and policies regarding Roma people and tensions with national minority groups in the region, but also by the more exclusive policies against refugees. Within this context, right-wing populist leaders could not make extreme claims about the threat immigration from Muslim countries represent that was not acceptable for a broad public, and consequently capitalize on the influx of refugees in Europe in 2015 to a greater degree than any Western European political movements did, even in the *de facto* absence of immigrants, refugees or a culturally different Muslim population.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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